Hossein Valamanesh: Char Soo
Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art
‘Char Soo’ means ‘four directions’ or ‘four sides’. In terms of a bazaar, the char soo is its main intersection. Hossein Valamanesh’s video installation Char Soo (2015) sets the ground for experiencing the time and movement of people by taking the viewer inside the middle of the grand bazaar in Arak, Iran.

At the centrepoint of four large video projections screened in four directions, watching four stationary camera shots, the viewer is immersed in the grand bazaar’s scenes and sounds. In the midst of colourful goods from myriad shops and the char soo’s traditional architecture of pointed arches, brick ceiling and a tiled pool, the viewer is able to follow the movement of people from screen to screen.

From the dark early mornings through the crowded noisiness of the day and finally its emptiness at night, the char soo’s images are all experienced in twenty-eight minutes. There is no narrative, no zooming, no panning, and there are no overt special effects. Three simultaneous details – the ceiling, the pool, and shops – are inserted at points near the beginning, middle, and end to give a break to the long duration of time and movement.

As a visual artist, Valamanesh usually works with natural and even humble materials. With minimum manipulation of raw resources, he is able to create elegant works with maximum emotional impact while also asking fundamental and philosophical questions about life and existence. Char Soo is no exception. It seems simple. The sounds are ambient, yet it has neither protagonists nor narration. It is filmed with a normal lens at eye level, stationary and straight of view, without any intervention in the bazaar activity or any changes in the rhythm of its traffic. We seem to encounter a segment of life exactly as it is. However, Char Soo’s apparent dissolves, compression of time, inserts, and the fact that its subjects notice the cameras are constant self-referential reminders that it does not pretend to be a true-to-life presentation.

In the absence of narrative, zooming, panning, tilting and voice-over, the notions of time and movement become particularly prominent. Sleep (1963) by Andy Warhol, One Million Years by On Kawara, and performances by Tehching Hsieh come to mind. Some earlier works by Valamanesh are also worthy of notice in this context, such as The Lover Circles His Own Heart (1993), wherein a piece of silk, assisted by a motorised device, constantly circles its vertical axis like a dancing dervish. The silk is accompanied by a poem on the wall by Rumi which talks of the movement of everything in the world – Every atom/Turns bewildered/Beggars circle tables/Dogs circle carion. The lover circles his own heart.
Hossein VALAMANESH, Char Soo, 2015, pre-production still, © Hossein Valamanesh/Licensed by Viscopy, 2014
Photo M Reza Jahanpanah, courtesy the artist and GAGPROJECTS | Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide
While the movement is apparent, time is felt by the circling as it continuously repeats. Another work, *Passing Time* (2011), is a video within a black box that shows the artist’s hands and fingers continuously forming and reforming the infinity sign. In the video, there is no beginning or ending, ‘no definite result or product … We are confronted with a pure and repetitive ritual of wasting time – a secular ritual beyond any claim of magical power, beyond any religious tradition or cultural convention.’

*The Lover* … has a clear local exotic flavour with metaphysical overtones. It is from the 1990s, a decade when some artists responded to globalisation and universalism with localisation, particularity, and even exoticism. Shirin Neshat is a prime example. Later, some artists rejected participating in this market-oriented new-Orientalist pattern by employing pigeonholed identities and self-exoticising manners. As I noted elsewhere, ‘Although to some artists “glocal” was the answer, to others translocality was preferred. Instead of being either this or that, local or global, they found the best way would be to emphasise mobility, flows, flux, in-betweenness and the transgression of borders.’

In this context, the abstract and universal language of *Passing Time* can be understood. More obvious is Valamanesh’s *Longing/Belonging* (1997), set in South Australian bush, which shows the in-betweenness in terms of locality in his works.

Time, however, is not absent in this piece; the flames add a temporal or durational sense. Compared to the minimalism of *The Lover* … and *Passing Time*, *Char Soo* is more complicated in spite of its simple appearance. It encompasses different times, with real or physical time sensed through the movement of people, the sun’s changing light, and a constantly blinking neon sign. The contemporary era – another kind of time – is evident through clothing and in technologies such as motorcycles, neon signs and mobile phones. Historical time is also visible in the two-hundred-year-old building. More importantly, the zeitgeist can be seen in the behaviour and interactions between people. A prime example is when two Mullahs in the film are ignored by everyone. To a viewer, say forty years ago, this would have been shocking since everyone traditionally paid respect to clergymen.

Although the grand bazaar’s pointed arches, banners, and neon signs in Farsi point to Islamic and Iranian elements, these are not glorified or romanticised. This could be a reaction to the selective heritage idolisation and constant worship of the past by the Iranian government and its people (although to different pasts and histories). When considering what environmental and temporal factors caused the growth of historical romanticism, political scientist Mehrzad Borojerdi replied, ‘Boasting about great ancestors is for feeding identity concerns, healing our wounded consciousness, and attracting tourist dollars.’ In this context, instead of glorifying history, some Iranian artists present it with ambiguity, flux, and in-betweenness. Valamanesh, consciously or unconsciously, also works in this direction.

There are many factors indicating that *Char Soo* does not romanticise or mystify real and historical time: Valamanesh’s use of sharp focus and minute details instead of soft focus; the use of available light instead of special lighting; the lack of close-ups or special effects; and the inclusion of ugly shop doors, exposed electrical wires, cheap Chinese goods, and elderly and disabled market-goers. By superimposing past and present in this way, the work directs our attention to real life and time instead of mystifying or demystifying Iranian or non-Iranian elements. *Char Soo* is not trying to show particularities; it is neither a metaphor of Iran, nor does it stand for Arak.
Unlike other traditional cities, Arak is not an organic or old city. It was planned about two hundred years ago for military and security reasons, and today is one of Iran’s most industrial centres. Its name in international journalism is identified with its nuclear reactor. Thus, the bazaar cannot be a metaphor for Arak, let alone Iran. However, the bazaar – which is not only an economic centre but also a cultural, social, religious, and political one – becomes an appropriate ground upon which to see a range of interactions between a diverse group of people, including those of different ages, genders, social classes, and tastes. With four directions and a dome above, the char soo has been used by many Persian poets as a metaphor for the world. Valamanesh, who is fond of and influenced by Persian poetry, does the same.
Of course the metaphor of life cannot be devoid of any narrative. Although there is no major narrative in Char Soo, there are many micro-narratives such as the ignoring of Mullahs and women going to work alone in the early morning. Although many of these little incidents may not be understood by viewers unfamiliar with Iranian culture, Char Soo allows the viewer to witness the activity and passage of time with a normal pace and gain insights into its subjects’ relationships, habits, physicality, kindness, and occasional mischief. This is contrary to many Orientalists who described the Orient as static, silent, and even lazy.

Valamanesh has come a long way from the warm, earthy representations of homeland dwellings he painted in his early years in Australia, and his three-dimensional works such as Dwelling (1980) and Longing/Belonging (1997). Char Soo avoids sentimentality and exoticism. It brings the space, time, and activity of a bazaar to us through film, its delicate neutrality and distance inspiring reflection and absorbing the viewer.
Endnotes

1 Interestingly, the quotation is Boris Groys’s description of Francis Alÿs’s *Song for Lupita* (1998) which applies to *Passing Time* word-by-word. Boris Groys, ‘Comrades of Time’, *e-flux* journal, Issue 11, Dec 2009, p.6

2 From my talk ‘Ambiguity, flux and in-betweenness: Beyond any Particular Narrative of History in Contemporary Iranian Art’ for the exhibition *Beyond History* at Framer Framed, Amsterdam, March 2015

3 ‘Valamanesh and Translocality’, *Broadsheet Contemporary Visual Art+Culture*, 43.1 2014

Crew on location at the grand bazaar in Arak, Iran, 2014
Photo Hossein Rokhsati, courtesy the artist and GAGPROJECTS | Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide
The Lover Circles His Own Heart, 1993, silk, electric motor, 210 x 210 cm
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Australia Photo: M Michalski and B Wojcik

Longing/Belonging, 1997, colour photograph, 99 x 99 cm
Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales Photo: Ric Martin

Passing Time, 2011, video, collaboration with Nassiem Valamanesh, MDF, monitor and media player, 61 x 52 x 52 cm, 4 minute loop, edition of 6 + 2 A/P
Hossein VALAMANESH
Char Soo, 2015
in collaboration with Nassiem Valamanesh
four channel video projection
with stereo sound, 26:50 mins
Producer: Bridget Ikin
Cinematographers: Nassiem Valamanesh and Mohammad Reza Jahanpanah
First Camera Assistant: Hadi Manoochehrpanah
Second Camera Assistant: Alireza Izadi
Editor: Nassiem Valamanesh
Line Producer: Mohammad Reza Jahanpanah
Sound Designer: Liam Egan
Production Manager Iran: Mohammad Reza Moradi
Production co-ordinator Australia: Bethany Bruce

Passing Time, 2011
video
Collaboration with Nassiem Valamanesh
MDF, monitor and media player
61 x 52 x 52 cm
4 minute loop
dition of 6 + 2 A/P

Architecture of the sky no.2, 2014
lotus leaves on paper on plywood
120 x 120 cm

Architecture of the sky no.2, 2014
lotus leaves on paper on plywood
120 x 120 cm

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Hossein Valamanesh is represented by GAGPROJECTS | Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide

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